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ABSTRACT

A review of current literature regarding the state of the art in the conduct of internal communication and public relations audits by public relations practitioners reveals that these two related measurement activities are of considerable importance to the practice of public relations. Public relations audits are concerned with exploratory research on relations between an organization and its public. Internal communications audits describe and assess the process and structure of communication within an organization. Both types of audits are used by public relations practitioners in managing communication activities of organizations, but they serve distinctly different functions, reflecting divergent origins and perspectives. Open systems theory is used to distinguish the two different functions of the audits. A public relations audit is a boundary spanning activity that measures the public's attitudes, levels, and behaviors affecting an organization's survival and growth. An internal communication audit is concerned with the structure and function of the system. Because an organization has less control over its external environment than its internal systems, the public relations audit is of greater importance than the internal communication audit. (DF)

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A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF INTERNAL COMMUNICATION AND PUBLIC RELATIONS AUDITS

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ABSTRACT

A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF INTERNAL COMMUNICATION AND PUBLIC RELATIONS AUDITS

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Presented to the Public Relations Special Interest Group, International Communication Association Convention, Honolulu, Hawaii, May 26, 1985

Public relations audits are concerned with exploratory research on relations between an organization and its publics. Internal communication audits describe and assess the process and structure of communication within an organization. Both types of audits are used by public relations practitioners in managing communication activities of organizations. While both audits involve study of organizational communication, they serve distinctly different functions, reflecting divergent origins and perspectives.

Open systems theory is used to distinguish two different functions of the audits. A public relations audit is a boundary spanning activity that involves the measurement of attitudes, knowledge levels and behavior of manifest and emergent publics affecting an organization's survival and growth. Public relations audits help public relations planners quantify the situation analysis, a crucial planning element in the application of Management By Objectives to public relations. Public relations audits are a type of formative evaluation, exploratory in concept and vulnerable to premature closure. Public relations audits are strategic management tools crafted to meet management information needs and situation specific in their findings.

An internal communication audit is concerned with the structure and function of system throughput. Because internal communication is necessary for internal control and feedback within an open system, structures and functions of such communication are relatively enduring, when compared to dynamic, boundary-spanning relations between an organization and interpenetrating systems. By using standardized audit systems, comparisons can be made between organizations and within the same organization at several points in time. Internal communication "norms" can be generalized from such audits.

The implications of these differences are considered in terms of practitioner roles within organizations.

A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF INTERNAL COMMUNICATION AND PUBLIC RELATIONS AUDITS

The purpose of this paper is to explore the current state of the art in the conduct of internal communication and public relations audits by public relations practitioners. These two related measurement activities are of considerable importance to the practice of public relations. First, audits bring social scientific methods to public relations practice. When properly designed and implemented, audits constitute an important first step away from "seat of the pants" practices to a more scientific approach. Second, audits facilitate management decisions about the communication activities of organizations, based on empirical data. Practitioners who implement audits may find that such scientific information gathering provides access to strategic organizational decision making, a basis for penetrating the management/decision-making core. Third, audits can be used to change the goals, objectives, and processes within the management core, rather than simply facilitating changes by management of employees and external publics. That is, audits can be used to facilitate two-way symmetric public relations (Grunig and Hunt, 1984, p. 42), an approach where the management core itself is also the target of change, along with publics.

A public relations audit is a systematic analysis of the knowledge levels, attitudes, and behavioral predispositions of a public or publics toward an organization and issues considered important by that organization. While use of the term is not consistently applied, a public relations audit is here treated as a type of formative evaluation, as research conducted on publics before public relations plans are developed. Summative evaluation of program impact is distinct from the exploratory approach of public relations audits.

An internal communication audit is a systematic analysis of the structure and patterns of communication within organizations, and of employee satisfaction with such communication. As such, internal communication audits are a diagnostic tool, allowing organizations to describe and assess their internal communication system and to pinpoint problems for corrective action.

As will be developed below, the two types of audits differ in the variables upon which they focus and the information needs that they serve. In order to appreciate the differences between the two types of audits, the context and origins of both types must first be considered.

The Context of the Audits

Differences in internal communication and public relations audits can be traced to their origins in different academic disciplines and different organizational contexts. Internal communication audits trace their academic roots to organizational communication, management, and speech communication. When such audits are conducted for organizations, the organizational units concerned with personnel, organizational development, or human resource development are the most likely sponsors. Public relations audits, on the other hand, trace their roots to public relations and journalism. When such audits are conducted for organizations, the public relations (also called public affairs, community relations, and a host of other euphemisms) unit is the likely sponsor. These differences in academic origins and organizational context affect the information needs that motivate the audit, the approaches used, and the perspectives brought to their applications.

Evolution of Public Relations Audits

The public relations audit has evolved into a formal information-gathering tool within the last decade. As recently as 1975, an article in a

major professional publication stated that public relations and communication audits were synonymous and that convenience samples of "key members of key publics" served as a respondent sample frame (Jones, 1975, p. 7). This notion of using "key informants" in the conduct of a public relations audit has its roots in traditional journalistic practices.

A plurality (about 40 percent) of contemporary public relations practitioners studied journalism in college. Not surprisingly, public relations audits in the 1970s resembled "man on the street" interviews, decidedly unscientific interviews with a few convenient citizens about an issue of public opinion. Such information gathering is consistent with journalistic training. Further, as Cutlip, Center and Broom (1985, p. 210) argue, "in-depth interviews with key informants often yield early warning signals on important issues."

Pressures on the practice. Just as informal opinion seeking in journalism bowed to pressures for "precision journalism," public relations audits have also matured, become more scientific. Public relations practitioners are driven toward scientific audits by forces of accountability, professionalism, and the related growth in the importance of program evaluation.

Managers of organizations increasingly demand that public relations account for organizational resources used. Practitioners are increasingly expected to show benefits for public relations dollars spent. The demand for accountability has set in motion a chain of events that are changing the practice. Accountability requires summative or impact evaluation, the measurement of the results achieved when a program is implemented. Impact evaluation, in turn, requires specification of measurable goals and objectives, the setting of desired outcomes against which subsequent program

performance is measured. These goals and objectives involve the change or maintenance of knowledge, attitudes or behavior of publics, of the management core, or both. The development of meaningful goals and objectives, in turn, requires an understanding of the status quo, a quantitative understanding of "what's going on now" with regard to the knowledge, attitudes or behavior of management and publics. The scientific public relations audit provides such an understanding.

At the same time, public relations practitioners are striving for professional status. The accrediting standards of the Public Relations Society of America and the International Association of Business Communicators are indicators of this drive. The scientific public relations audit, then, can be viewed as an attempt to legitimize the function, to show that the cluster of communication skills that make up the practice rests on a foundation of scientific research. Often, the scientific public relations audit is the first step toward setting goals and objectives, then evaluating program success or failure in reaching those goals. As such, the initial implementation of a scientific public relations audit by an organization's public relations unit constitutes a major organizational innovation.

The scientific audit. Unlike "seat of the pants" forebears, the scientific public relations audit rests on principles of probabilistic sampling, on seeking truly representative samples of potential and actual publics. The scientific audit is a formative evaluation technique involving surveys of broadly defined publics. When a public is small in number, a census of all members of that public can be surveyed. Often, however, publics are sufficiently large that sampling techniques are preferred. As with the internal communication audit discussed below, the scientific audit starts with a set of information needs. These information needs are based on the

suspicions, concerns, and public relations problems, both manifest and emergent, as defined by the organization's management core and public relations practitioners. The specification of a sample frame and the design of a survey instrument are both served by the use of qualitative techniques. Depth interviews and focus group studies with target publics help clarify definitions of the publics themselves, as well as sensitize the auditor to key issues and concepts.

Cutlip, Center, and Broom (1985) see the scientific audit as playing a useful role in conducting a situation analysis. (The authors refer to the audit generically as "research."). In the public relations planning process, the situation analysis is a fleshing out of the problem statement that motivates the public relations program. The situation analysis is a complete statement of "what's going on now" with regard to the public relations problem. This analysis includes the role of the organization, as well as the role of publics, in contributing to the problem.

A public relations audit is a technique for gathering information about an established or emergent publics' knowledge, attitudes, and behavior about the organization or issues important to the organization. The audit can also use coorientation measurement techniques to study the management core as well. That is, management's perceptions of how publics feel about an issue can be studied. Coupled with a systematic understanding of management's views of an issue, relational measures of congruency and agreement can be made. The audit quantifies levels of knowledge, attitude and behavior of management and publics so that reasonable goals and objectives can be set. In this sense, the audit can sometimes be "bootstrapped" into the role of a pretest measure in a pretest-posttest evaluation design. However, such multiple roles blur the distinction between formative and summative evaluation. Pretest measures

in a summative or impact evaluation would seek multiple measures of key attitudes, knowledge levels and behavioral predispositions that are the focus of the program to be implemented. Audits, on the other hand, measure these same attitudes, knowledge levels, and behaviors in a more exploratory manner, often using univariate indicators of constructs. Only at a later stage in the planning process will decisions be made about which constructs are foci of program efforts. Further, since one outcome of the audit is a more precise definition of publics, the original audit survey may prove too broad in its sample frame and its qualifiers to usefully serve as the first wave of an impact evaluation. In summary, the audit is a "snapshot" of the status quo, a formative evaluation tool that supplements and quantifies other information contained in the situation analysis of the public relations planning process.

Grunig and Hunt (1984, p. 104-110) introduce the concept of the behavioral molecule to explain the role of public relations audits. The behavioral molecule is a model that explains the decision-making process among public relations managers (and other managers) in organizations. The behavioral molecule describes a cyclical process:

...Detect...Construct...Define...Select...Confirm...Behave...Detect...

In making a decision, a public relations problem is detected, a series of potential solutions are constructed conceptually, then alternatives are defined operationally, a best alternative is selected, then that alternative is confirmed through consideration of areas where that best alternative might go wrong. Finally, the manager behaves, implements the best alternative. As the solution is implemented, the manager begins the process over again, by monitoring or detecting the effectiveness of the solution being implemented in solving the original problem.

Grunig and Hunt (1984, p. 109) see public relations audits as aids to the detection and construction segments of the behavioral molecoule. This formative evaluation technique provides information that can be used to define publics and to provide an initial measure of what those publics know, how those publics feel, and how those publics may behave toward the organization.

Drawing on the two leading textbooks in public relations principles, the following points can be made about public relations audits. First, audits are a formative evaluation tool that help define publics and provide initial measures of publics' attitudes, knowledge levels, and behavioral predispositions toward the organization and issues important to the organization. Second, public relations audits are moving away from "seat of the pants" techniques rooted in journalistic techniques of information gathering. Instead, public relations audits are becoming more scientific, drawing on methods of social scientific inquiry to systematically measure attributes of publics. Public relations audits are also adopting probabilistic sampling techniques to help insure that those surveyed are representative of the larger publics from which they are drawn. Third, public relations audits measure attitudes, knowledge levels, and behavioral predispositions of publics in order to quantify information in the early stages of public relations decision making and program planning. As conceptualized by Cutlip, Center and Broom (1985), public relations audits contribute to a comprehensive situation analysis, a precursor to the setting of program goals. Following Grunig and Hunt's (1984) conceptualization, public relations audits provide needed information to public relations decision makers during the detection and construction stages of the behavioral molecule.

In summary, the public relations audit is a public relations

management tool, a set of non-standard measurement instruments the generate situation-specific findings. Quantitative research techniques have only recently begun to elevate public relations audits from the status of "seat of the pants" measures. Internal communication and public relations audits unfortunately have been used somewhat interchangeably. A public relations audit can be conducted both within and outside the organization. Employees, as well as external publics, may serve as focal publics of a public relations audit. What then distinguishes the public relations audit from the internal communication audit? To answer this question, the context and origins of the internal communication audit must be considered.

The Evolution of Internal Communication Audits

The internal communication audit has a considerably longer formal history than the scientific public relations audit. The results of internal communication audits are reported in the literature as far back as the 1950s (Greenbaum, Hellweg, and Falcione, 1983). Systematization of internal audit procedures and instruments also predates current efforts to systematize public relations audits. Normative data are available from many internal communication audits; no such data are available from scientific public relations audits.

The history of the LTT, OCD, and the ICA audits is well documented elsewhere (see, for example, Goldhaber, 1976; Goldhaber, 1983; Goldhaber, Dennis, Richetto, and Wiio, 1979). The specific procedures and instruments associated with these audit systems are also detailed in readily available sources (see, for example, Goldhaber and Rogers, 1979; Goldhaber, 1983; Goldhaber, Wiio, Dennis, and Richetto, 1979; Wiio, 1974). Finally, results of the use of these standardized programs is synthesized in Goldhaber, Yates,

Porter, and Lesniak (1978) and Wiio, Goldhaber, and Yates (1980).

Audits conducted prior to the development of these internal communication standardized audit programs generally suffer from seven methodological weaknesses, as pointed out by Goldhaber and Krivonos (1977) and Goldhaber and Rogers (1979). Weaknesses include reliance on single-instrument approaches; the generation of situation-specific findings (limiting inferences to a single organization); the use of small, unrepresentative samples; lack of standardization and norms; limited measurement of actual behaviors; measurements conducted at only one point in time; and questionable predictive validity.

While the Finnish audit programs were developed by Wiio and his associates in response to a "call for help" from industry, the American effort was generated primarily by a perceived need among researchers to develop a systematic program. The thrust behind the ICA communication audit was that such an effort would first improve organizational communication theory which in turn would ultimately benefit industry. The ICA audit was designed to assess information flow, message content, and communication attitudes and perceptions. Using a number of measurement techniques, the ICA audit provides a variety of attitudinal, perceptual, and behavioral data. Due in part to the standardization of measurements, communication can be studied over time. Comparisons can be made between organizations, using normative data (Goldhaber and Rogers, 1979). Comparisons are also facilitated by collecting employee assessments of both "actual" and "ideal" attributes of the internal communication system. The LTT and OCD audit systems focus primarily upon the communication climate in organizations utilizing a single research instrument. Some attention is given in audits to the organization's internal media

efforts such as house organs, bulletin boards, and newsletters. These media are typically tools of public relations practitioners who specialize in employee relations or internal communication.

In summary, internal communication audits focus primarily upon communication within the organization, rather than between the organization and its environment. The purpose of these audits is to describe and assess communication itself. Driven (in America at least) by a desire to facilitate organizational communication research, emphasis is placed on standardized measures that permit comparisons of organizational communication over time and among different organizations. The goal is to develop norms and generate empirical generalizations that are cross-situational.

Systems Theory as a Unifying Construction

One challenge facing public relations as an emerging profession is the need to develop a theoretical foundation for the practice. Without such theory, the specific skills or techniques applied to the practice (news releases, special events, internal publications, etc.) are matters of subjective choice. Without theory, practitioners remain unclear as to what a public relations problem is. Further, they are unclear as to what techniques to use to solve the problem--and why. As with other professions like medicine and engineering, a basic scientific foundation is required in order for public relations to attain professional status.

In Grunig and Hunt (1984) and Cutlip, Center, and Broom (1985), open systems theory is first introduced in major public relations introductory textbooks as a theoretical basis for the practice of public relations. Indeed, open systems theory may emerge as the foundation for the the theoretical organization of the public relations profession. At the same

time, open systems theory provides a basis for distinguishing differences in foci and purposes of public relations and internal communication audits.

Boundary spanning. An open system is defined as "a set of interacting units which endures within an established boundary" that "exchanges inputs and outputs through a boundary that is permeable" (Cutlip, Center, and Broom, 1985, pp. 184-188). Organizations, as open systems, can be classified as relatively open or closed. The public relations unit performs a boundary spanning function when it communicates outward from the management core, attempting to, as Grunig and Hunt argue, either control or adapt to the organization's environment. Practitioners also span the organization's boundary when they monitor or scan the organization's environment, bringing information about priority publics into the management core and facilitating decisions. Organizations seek to establish and maintain autonomy, to pursue goals, to survive, and to grow. However, other systems (publics in this context) interpenetrate the organization (Grunig and Hunt, 1984, p. 94), reducing its autonomy and affecting its ability to survive and grow.

Grunig and Hunt provide three concepts from systems theory that can be used to contrast public relations and internal communication audits. When the organization is conceptualized as the system, and the management core as the system's control center, the public relations audit can be viewed as system input about the organization's environment. As Grunig and Hunt (1984, p. 94) argue, this input identifies "problems that have put the system out of equilibrium with interpenetrating systems in its environment." The organization can respond to this input by changing its current goal states, its homeostasis (Cutlip, Center, and Broom, 1985, p. 189). As an open system, the organization can even change its own internal structures and process, called morphogenesis (Cutlip, Center, and Broom, 1985, p. 190).

Because the public relations audit involves environmental inputs, its purposes are distinct from internal communication audits.

If we continue to define the organization as the system, then the internal communication audit involves analysis of internal processes and structures. After Grunig and Hunt (1985, p. 95), the internal communication audit is concerned with throughput, with the structures and processes that permit the system to organize matter, energy and information from the environment to produce output. Viewed in this way, the internal communication audit deals with the relatively enduring mechanisms of internal control and feedback that hold the units of the system together and direct them toward goal states. Goldhaber and Rogers (1979, p. 1) liken the internal communication audit to an annual physical checkup by one's physician, whereby "the physician assesses the patient's health by comparing vital signs with the norms for healthy people...." The ICA Communication Audits attempt to do precisely that for organizations, comparing communication attributes of the audited organization against "norms" established through audits of comparable organizations. When audits are conducted within the same organization at several points in time, the primary concern is with the organization's morphogenesis, with changes in its internal structures and processes.

This conceptual distinction between public relations and internal communication audits has several important implications which are spelled out below. However, an important "loose end" must be tied before the conceptual discussion is closed. That "loose end" involves public relations audits of employees. When a public relations audit is conducted on an organization's employees, the system must be redefined. As a boundary spanning activity, the public relations audit of employees treats the management core as the system and employees as interpenetrating systems. The public relations audit of

employees provides input into the management core about an important system in the management core's environment: employees. This shift in the system's boundary helps to explain the differences between an internal communication audit and a public relations audit of employees. These differences are considered below.

Contrasting the Audits

As the name implies, public relations audits are concerned with relationships between the organization and interpenetrating open systems in its environment. Internal communication audits, on the other hand, are concerned with structures and processes of communication within the boundary of an open system.

Thus, a public relations audit is concerned primarily with the attitudes, knowledge levels, and behavior of priority publics as they regard the organization or issues important to the organization. That is, attitudes, knowledge levels and behavior are the operational attributes of relationships between interpenetrating open systems. As an organization approaches the state Grunig and Hunt (1985, p. 42) call two-way symmetric, a public relations audit will also include coorientation measures of the management core's attitudes, knowledge levels, and behavior toward publics or issues regarded as important by publics.

An internal communication audit is concerned with the attributes of the communication system itself within the organization. Thus, an internal communication audit describes the interpersonal communication network within an organization (Goldhaber and Rogers, 1979, p. 164), attitudes of members toward the adequacy and quality of information (p. 35-51), and presumed outcomes such as job satisfaction (p. 48-49). These are attributes of the

organization's internal control and feedback structures and processes.

These differences between internal communication and public relations audits have several implications. Organizational communication is generally the dependent construct of an internal communication audit. Variables measured are different attributes of this construct. Communication is only one of several intervening constructs in a public relations audit; the dependent constructs are relationships with interpenetrating systems. In a public relations audit, communication variables are measured because communication is an important tool that the management core may use to control or adapt to interpenetrating systems. However, there are other tools that public relations practitioners use to help the management core control or adapt to publics. Cutlip, Center, and Broom (1985) clearly delineate another tool of adaption and/or control as action strategies. An action strategy includes "steps taken to change the organization's policies, procedures, products, services, and behavior to better serve the mutual interests of the organization and its publics" (p. 258). Thus, communication variables are measured in a public relations audit to facilitate subsequent development of message and media strategies to change or maintain relationships between the organization and its publics. In an internal communication audit, on the other hand, attributes of organizational communication predominate. Indeed, measures are made of job satisfaction because such satisfaction is hypothesized to be an outcome of communication satisfaction and other organizational and individual variables. The ICA Audit Project identified communication transactions between the organization and its environment as an important information need of managers (Goldhaber and Rogers, 1979, p. 5-6) but the ICA Communication Audit does not deal extensively with such communication (Hamilton and Hadley, 1981). Further, when external

communication is studied in an internal audit, the focus is primarily on the description and assessment of external communication itself, rather than relationships that such communication maintains or changes.

The public relations audit, concerned as it is with the dynamic interpenetration of publics across the organization's boundary, is both strategic and situation specific. Thus, it is arguably inappropriate at a conceptual level to aspire to a standardized, generic "Public Relations Audit" template similar to the one that the ICA Communication Audit provides for internal communication audits. While one might be tempted to conclude that the "failure" to develop such a template for public relations audits is only an indicator of the immaturity of the discipline, such a conclusion ignores key distinctions between the purposes of the two types of audits. The internal communication processes and structures of organizations are relatively enduring. Further, these enduring structures and processes are likely to be similar across like organizations. The pursuit of "normal" or "ideal" internal communication attributes is epistemologically credible. The development of audit templates like the ICA Communication Audit is a reasonable strategy.

While public relations audits may also develop some standardization as they evolve, they are required in principle to be relatively situation specific. As a boundary spanning unit in an organization, the public relations unit must be sensitive to a constantly shifting organizational environment. New publics emerge to interpenetrate the organization and affect its autonomy, its ability to pursue goals, to grow, to survive. Precisely because an organization has less control over its external environment than its internal subsystems, "openness" in public relations audits is of greater relative importance when compared to the "closedness" of the internal

communication audit. The scientific public relations audit provides quantitative information on emergent public relations problems, on shifting attitudes, knowledge levels, and behavior of publics and the management core. Which relationships, which publics are audited depends on the situation.

Using Internal Communications & Public Relations Audits Together

Hamilton and Hadley (1981) note in their critique of the ICA Audit that scant attention is paid to external communication. They argue persuasively for the extension of the internal communication audit to collect data on external communication and the reactions of external publics to that communication. Such changes in the ICA audit would subsume some aspects of a public relations audit under the internal communication audit. While there may be some value in collecting data on external communication in an internal communication audit, the two audits serve distinctly different purposes that defy the absorption of one type of audit by the other.

The public relations unit in an organization may well elect to conduct both internal communication and public relations audits. Because employees are only one of many priority publics that concern practitioners, the internal communication audit might be viewed as a subset of the information needs of decision makers. Decision makers also require information about relationships between the organization and interpenetrating systems. While the internal communication audit provides a detailed description and assessment of internal communication within the organization, such information may be incomplete from a strategic perspective.

For example, an organization's employees may be targets of a unionization campaign. Union organizers and pro-union employees may represent an emergent public interpenetrating the organization and affecting autonomy.

An internal communication audit provides some of the information that the management core requires to control or adapt to this interpenetration. But other information may also be needed, information specific to the emerging situation. How would employees react to preemptive provision by the organization of the benefits union organizers indicate they will demand? If unionization is assured, how would the union react to partial ownership of the corporation, a seat on the board of directors? For each of these questions, actions of the management core might be "pretested" among emergent publics through a public relations audit. Communication variables are perhaps secondary to variables describing relationships and anticipating reactions of publics to actions of the management core. In this context, enduring attributes of the internal communication structures and processes are subsumed under the situation-specific information needs of the management core about relationships between the management core and emergent publics.

Penetrating the Management Core

One of the problems of managing the public relations function for an organization is participation in decision making. As Broom and Dozier (1983) argue, unless practitioners successfully participate in decision making, they end up relegated to low-level output functions, explaining actions of the management core that may not be responsive to inputs from the environment.

The scientific public relations audit provides practitioners with a basis for participating in decision making. By demonstrating expertise in environmental scanning through the use of public relations audits, practitioners become valued facilitators of decision making. Practitioners who back up their recommendations with quantitative data about publics can "earn the right" to participate in decision making. Such practitioners can

project public reactions to organizational actions. Broom describes this role as problem-solving process facilitation (Cutlip, Center, and Broom, 1985, p. 69).

The internal communication audit permits practitioners to play a different kind of role. Drawing upon the growing body of knowledge about organizations and communication, the practitioner who specializes in internal communication audits can compare the organization's communication structures and processes to "norms." Such practitioners can make expert recommendations to the management core about facilitating communication processes and structures. Such activities involve the practitioner roles of expert prescription and communication facilitation, roles which Broom (1982) has identified in studies of public relations practitioners. However, these practitioner roles are focused on the relatively narrow issue of internal communication rather than the broad issues of autonomy, survival, and growth. A practitioner viewed by others as an expert on internal communication will be considered less relevant to day-to-day decision making than a boundary-spanning practitioner whose understanding of interpenetrating systems is relevant to a wide range of organizational decisions and actions.

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